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Decolonising the Curriculum in the Light of the Incarnation

Introduction

On March 9th 2015, protests erupted among students of the University of Cape Town, South Africa, under the slogan #RhodesMustFall, who demanded that the statue of British colonial-era politician and diamond magnate Cecil Rhodes be removed from a prominent place on their campus. The protest was given further impetus internationally by movements such as Black Lives Matter as well as reactions to widespread accusations of institutional racism. As well as inspiring demands for other statues to be torn down or relocated - from Edward Colson in Bristol, England, to Hannah Duston in New Hampshire – the broader demands of the protest gave birth to an academic movement known as ‘Decolonising the Curriculum’.

This term itself is contested and therefore difficult to define. For its supporters Decolonising the Curriculum (DtC) entails the balancing and broadening of the academic curriculum in schools and universities from an exclusively Western-centred canon of ideas and texts, to include the philosophy, world-views and history of other cultures. For its sceptics, it is another front in a seemingly endless culture war, which may threaten to undermine the foundations of Western Christian civilisation itself. As one of the most discussed issues in education today, it is timely for us who work in Catholic schools and universities to consider the issue in the light of our faith, despite the risk of controversy. In seeking a balanced way forward, reflection on the wonder of Incarnation may provide a way out the impasse.

The Incarnation and Decolonising the Curriculum

The wonder of the Incarnation means that the eternal Son of God took flesh in the life of Jesus Christ, who as a first century Jewish man, was born into a particular culture in a specific historical era. The Risen Christ is forever marked by this specific human life, which has been taken definitively into the life of the Trinity. Yet, “by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some

fashion with *every man*,”¹ not just those of his own specific culture. In their teaching on what they call ‘recapitulation’, the Fathers of the Church point out that Jesus lived all ages of life – childhood, adolescence and adulthood – in order to sanctify, save and divinize all human experience.

The particularity of Jesus’ culture, yet the universal import of the Incarnation, formed the first true theological debate of the early Church: did Jesus’ Jewish culture, expressed in circumcision and dietary laws, have to be adopted by a believer in order to be saved? At the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the apostles ruled that God’s universal salvific will and the universal implications of the Incarnation meant that people of all nations under heaven can be saved. Thus Paul proclaims that differences of identity and ethnicity between people are not abolished but are relativised, since their deeper unity in Christ allows means that there is no longer Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female.² In subsequent centuries, such a vision formed the basis of the development of universal human rights, as seen for example in the New World debates in imperial Spain: Dominican friars Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolomé de Las Casas argued that indigenous people have rights since they are made in the image and likeness of God, they have an immortal soul destined for eternal life, and Christ died for their sins, so that, “All the people in the world are human beings.”³

Crucially, the universal import of the Incarnation opened the way for the cultural expansion of Christianity from the Semitic into the Greco-Roman world. Dialogue with the philosophy of a non-Jewish culture was valid, since every culture can truly express the truth of the Incarnate Son. The Incarnation led St Justin Martyr to argue that there are ‘seeds of the Word’ present in all cultures: since the universe was created through God’s eternal Word, who has become flesh, the cosmos bears his imprint, and therefore in both the natural world and in human thought and culture the presence of the Word Incarnate can be discerned.

The balance of both the *particularity* of the Incarnation in first-century Jewish culture and its *universality* can be summarized in an established theological maxim: the Apostolic era alone is normative and definitive for the faith of the Church, yet subsequent eras and other cultures can be

authentic, if subordinate, bearers of the Good News of the Incarnation. This includes but is not limited to Greco-Roman philosophy and culture, the first to be evangelised and the one which shaped the language of Christianity.

Greco-Roman thought patterns proved exceptionally fertile for the Gospel, adding precision, clarity and abstraction to Semitic thought, such that there arguably exists a particular affinity between Greek thought and Christianity. Yet it is worth noting that the dialogue was not without its pains. Arianism in particular demonstrated that the attempt to mould the radical implications of the Incarnation into a neo-Platonist Greek world view could impoverish the Good News to the point of heresy. Progressively, Christianity's incarnational genius revealed itself in its first 1500 years as a capacity to evangelize a multiplicity of cultures - Celtic, Gothic, Slavic – resulting in an enrichment of architecture, music, and sacramental and liturgical practice.

In the modern era, sociologist John L. Allen Jr quotes Gambian scholar Lamin Sanneh who notes that in Africa, Christianity has engaged in inculturation much more successfully than Islam, which is more tied to its specifically Arabic cultural roots and which has sought to Arabize converts.⁴ The Church has recognised that inculturation - the process of dialogue between the Gospel and cultures - must fully respect the integrity of each, while giving primacy to the radical newness of the former. Analyzing inculturation in the African context, Pope John Paul II exhorted African Christians, "to look inside yourselves. Look to the riches of your own traditions,"⁵ when seeking meaning. The Good News, he writes, "must take root in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word"⁶ and engage in "taking on all authentic human values, purifying them from sin and restoring to them their full meaning."⁷

To summarize, belief in the Incarnation means that the Good News can take root in all cultures, where seeds of the Word are found, effecting a discernment and purification in critical dialogue which can enrich both the culture and the Church. Therefore, in principle the great Tradition can give assent to the ideals of the DtC movement, understood as a desire to engage with a wide range of

voices, world views and cultures in the curriculum, including those which have been disparaged in the past. The Catholic Church is a universal family of faith, in which a legitimate plurality of language, liturgy and theology is welcomed.

In the past decades the Church has embraced this very ideal, not least through the ministry of recent popes. Beginning with Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, an acceleration of apostolic visits around the globe and the canonization of an international array of saints have revolutionized the Church's self-understanding. The nomination of cardinals from every corner of the globe has also allowed the voices of global Catholicism to be heard, aided by the election of the first pope from the Global South. Pope Francis has also been at pains to include statements from bishops' conferences from around the world in his encyclicals, as a genuine expression of magisterium and a welcome inclusion of global perspectives. Such globalizing tendencies are set to continue: John L. Allen Jr. lists "Global Catholicism" as the first trend revolutionising the contemporary Church, since by 2025 only one Catholic in five will be a non-Hispanic Caucasian.⁸

In society generally, the inclusion of voices from the Global South can broaden the narrow Western privileging of positivism or scientism, "an exaggerated reliance on the modes of investigation of the sciences, natural and social, treating these as superior to, even as exclusive of other forms of thinking and rationality."⁹ The inclusion of a more holistic, balanced and wisdom-informed knowledge preserved in many global southern cultures can be an ally against the attempt to marginalise religious discourse found in the secularist drift of the Global North. What is more, socially conservative Catholics worried about the capture of institutions such as the media by a socially liberal 'woke' agenda represented by the DtC movement, can be comforted by a realisation that the voices of the Global South in Church and in society are generally far more socially conservative than the modern West, in areas such as family life, gender, life issues and sexual morality. As noted below, it remains for those voices to be truly heard and not marginalised in their turn by a frequently intolerant dominant liberal opinion.

In the practical context of the Catholic parish and classroom, an embrace of the Church's universal vision could include a greater focus on saints of color in the religious education curriculum and liturgical calendar, and a commitment to action on global issues of justice and peace disproportionately affecting the South, such as climate change. Deepening ties between Catholic universities, schools and parishes in the Global North and South can also lead to increased mutual understanding and a sharing of spiritual and practical resources.

Scapegoating and Decolonising the Curriculum

Despite the cautious welcome for the principles of Decolonising the Curriculum understood as an embrace of a variety of worldviews, we have noted that any process of inculturation entails careful discernment. Therefore, it would be unwise for Catholic educators to embrace the aims of the movement uncritically, without weighing and purifying them in the light of the Gospel.

Critics of the DtC movement bristle at its determination to judge history by modern liberal standards and to erase or negate aspects of history from the academic curriculum and from public expression. In the UK this extends to the removal of statues dedicated to those connected with slavery, the renaming of buildings and streets named after those perceived to have held racist views, and a re-ordering of the school and university curriculum, especially in history courses. Public debate revolves around two broad and opposing approaches to civic spaces: removal/renaming, or 'retain and explain' – i.e. keeping existing statues and names but providing context via explanatory plaques or information boards. The heated current debate encompasses issues around identity, history and patriotism in the post-Brexit era.

In the Catholic sphere, critics fear that DtC's attempt to obscure the past is a part of a wider 'cancel culture' which increasingly aims to silence any dissenting voices opposing the dominant intellectual paradigm, including on social issues where the Church is at odds with socially liberal views. There is also a fear that the historical foundations of Christian culture and civilization are being undermined,

and that a plurality of cultural references will play into the fragmentation of the notion of truth itself, where there is no truth except 'my truth'.

In responding to these problematic facets of DtC, the Incarnation may again prove a useful key. If in the UK there is a slowly dawning awareness of the British Empire's complicity in slavery, there is no such reticence in the US, where slavery is referred to as America's 'original sin'. This neatly takes us into the theological sphere, and in particular the impact of the Incarnation.

The French philosopher René Girard, referred to as a modern Father of the Church by Bishop Robert Barron, laid the foundation for a modern understanding of original sin in his mimetic theory.¹⁰ In his study of the scriptures and classic literature, he discovered the presence of a scapegoating mechanism by which humans cope with rivalry. The dominant group casts out the weaker group or individual, whose expulsion seems justified by the subsequent sense of calm and peace which reigns within the group. As well as major historical instances such as ethnic cleansing, everyday examples such as the frenzy with which sports coaches or politicians are hounded into resigning, or the bullying of those who are perceived as different, are daily contemporary examples of this mechanism.

Girard argues that the sacrificial element of this process, rooted in the 'necessary victim' who is sacrificed for the peace of the people, is the primordial basis of religion, especially as God is viewed as wishing the sacrifice. Crucially, Girard sees the revelation of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition as the uncovering of this mechanism: instead of God desiring the sacrifice of the victim, in Jesus Christ the Son of God *is* the victim who - far from being ostracized - is vindicated by the Father in his Resurrection. For Girard this is the heart of the Incarnation, where the death and Resurrection of Jesus reveals the scapegoating mechanism to be a falsehood. Instead, rivalry between people and communities must be resolved by the uncovering of truth, by forgiveness, healing and reconciliation, and by the building of a non-rivalrous community, the Kingdom of God which has begun in the life of the Church.

Applying this to the Decolonising the Curriculum movement, we can see that its essential aim to give voice to history's ignored is laudable and deserving of Catholics educators' support. However, where this is done by casting out any voices from the past which are considered tainted, cancelling elements of history, or silencing dissenting voices, DtC risks falling into the same scapegoating trap, one where the victim becomes the oppressor. It also risks deflecting blame towards historical figures rather than engaging in an examination of conscience, and in its anger polarising opinion where it could be a catalyst for forgiveness and reconciliation.

At the service of the truth

The Catholic theological spirit has always been yes/and (in Latin, *et/et*) rather than either/or. As a reference point in our approach to these issues, this inclusive instinct means that where ideas, people and events from the past are silenced or cancelled, the truth is impoverished, and that this can have no place in Catholic education.

Instead, the universalist Catholic vision, rooted in a worldview which perceives seeds of the Word everywhere, cannot but seek the truth. Catholic epistemology entails a search for truth in all its richness, flowing from a vision of the unity of knowledge rooted in its one source (the Creator), and grasped in a dialogue of persons and cultures which mirrors the Trinitarian life. This entails looking for truth everywhere, including in voices and cultures which have historically been disparaged, marginalised or considered shameful, since in the Incarnation Christ has united himself to all, and bestowed a dignity on human culture. In doing so we can discover new sources of wisdom, and ways of knowing consonant with the origins of our faith in a Semitic wisdom tradition, as well as with our belief in the intangible world of faith beyond the West's impoverished positivist epistemology. Such optimism and commitment to the shared pursuit of truth can encourage our pupils and students away from the fractured and privatised vision of truth which can leave them feeling isolated and empty. Rather they can find energy, hope and meaning in "The Word made flesh, filled with grace and truth."¹¹

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¹ Gaudium et Spes, para 22. Italics mine.

² Galatians 3:28.

³ Apologética Historia Sumaria, Tomos 1 y 2, Ed. Edmundo O’Gorman, (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1967), 257.

⁴ Allen Jr, J. L. (2012). The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church. New York: Doubleday, p.22.

⁵ Pope John Paul II (1994). Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Ecclesia in Africa, art. 48.

⁶ Ibid, art. 60.

⁷ Ibid, art. 61.

⁸ Allen, p.17.

⁹ Sullivan, J. and McKinney, S. (2013) Education in a Catholic Perspective, Burlington: Ashgate, p.211.

¹⁰ Barron, R. (2015). Rene Girard, Church Father. Available:

<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/rene-girard-church-father/4982/>. The article gives a good overview of Girard’s thought.

¹¹ John 1:14.